

CHILD DISCIPLINE

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The following is from the new *Advanced Bible Studies Series* on the book of Proverbs, which is available from Way of Life Literature.

Proverbs 3:11-12; 13:24; 15:20; 17:21, 25; 19:18; 22:6, 15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17

The book of Proverbs is God's child discipline manual. We have seen that it is addressed to "my son" and "my children." It contains vast instruction to help parents educate children (see the studies on Proverbs 1-9 and these topical studies), and it also shows them how to apply the rod of correction when necessary. There is more sound information on child training in the little book of Proverbs than in all of the child psychology books that have ever been written. Here we will not consider child training in general, but child discipline and the use of the rod.

1. THE REASON FOR CHILD DISCIPLINE

The rod is strong medicine. Is it really necessary? The Bible does not leave us guessing as to why we need to discipline our children in a firm manner.

THE FIRST REASON FOR DISCIPLINE IS THE CHILD'S NATURE ("*Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child,*" Prov. 22:15).

He has a sinful nature that naturally disobeys and goes in the way of foolishness rather than wisdom (Prov. 22:15). Sound child training philosophy and technique begin with understanding the nature of a child. Modern child psychology begins with the idea that human beings are basically good and seeks to develop that inherent goodness. The Bible begins with the idea that human beings are fallen by nature and seeks to bring them to conversion and regeneration by the tools of conviction and repentance and faith through the instrumentality of the Law of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to spiritual growth by tools such as communion, surrender, obedience, and separation.

Another reason for discipline is because of what happens when a child is not disciplined.

Children that are not properly disciplined *will continue in the path of natural foolishness* (Prov. 22:15). Foolishness can only be driven away by the exercise of godly training and the application of the rod of correction.

Children that are not properly disciplined *bring sorrow and shame to the parents* (Prov. 17:21, 25; 29:15). Few things are more discouraging and painful to a parent than a wayward and rebellious child.

ANOTHER REASON WE SHOULD DISCIPLINE OUR CHILDREN IS BECAUSE OF WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHILD IS PROPERLY DISCIPLINED.

Children that are properly disciplined go in the way of wisdom rather than folly (Prov. 22:6).

The promise of God in Proverbs 22:6 is that the child so trained will not depart from that training and from that right way when he is old. This doesn't mean that a child so trained will never rebel against his training and never go astray. It means that if he does rebel he will repent and return to wisdom "*when he is old.*" It also doesn't mean that every child so trained will be a fervent servant of Christ, because we know that one's level of dedication to Christ is a matter of personal choice. But we are certain that this verse does mean that the child so trained will not be a reprobate and will not once for all turn away from faith in the true and living God in Jesus Christ. God said of Abraham: "*For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him*" (Gen. 18:19). We know that Abraham's son Isaac walked in the footsteps of his father's faith and did not turn aside to idols.

Some do not believe that Proverbs 22:6 is a promise, but we don't understand how it can be anything but a promise, and it is an encouraging one to parents who take their task of child training seriously. What, though, about those parents that seemingly raise their children in Christ's way but they rebel and go out into the world and never have anything further to do with Christ? We all probably know of such cases. Doesn't that mean that Proverbs 22:6 is *not* an actual promise? My answer to this challenge is that there are many ways that Christian parents can fail grievously even when it appears to outsiders that they are raising their children properly, and those grievous failures can ruin the effects of the training. *Lack of love, carnality, hypocrisy, sparing the rod, and loving the world* are five major things that can "spoil the vine" so that the fruit of that home is bitter rather than sweet and the training of children fails.

After the wise parent has done his best to train up a child in the way he should go, his trust is not in his training, knowing that it is surely imperfect, but his trust is in the God of mercy and grace who works all things together for good to them that love Him and who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Children that are properly disciplined are delivered from hell (Prov. 23:13-14). This passage contains another wonderful promise, and surely the Word of God means what it says.

This does not mean, of course, that a child can be saved apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Bible plainly states that he that believeth in Christ has eternal life, and he that does not

believe in Christ will not see life (John 3:36). The Lord Jesus told the very religious Nicodemus that except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

What Proverbs 23:13-14 implies, in light of New Testament truth, is that the wise Christian parent that properly disciplines his children and teaches them the gospel will have the joy of seeing them saved. It is similar to the promise of Acts 16:31 where Paul and Barnabas told the Philippian jailer, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, AND THY HOUSE.*” A person’s family is not automatically saved when he is saved, but by believing in Christ an individual is now in a position to expose his family to the gospel.

Proper discipline and the use of the rod prepare a child for salvation by teaching him repentance from sin and respect for authority.

Children that are properly disciplined give rest and delight to their parents (Prov. 29:17). This should be a powerful motive for parents to do whatever is necessary to train their children in God’s way. Nothing sets a Bible-believing Christian’s parent’s soul at rest and delights his heart more than knowing that his children are walking with Christ, and it is well worth every sacrifice that must be made.

2. THE RIGHT WAY OF CHILD DISCIPLINE

DISCIPLINE MUST BEGIN EARLY (Prov. 13:24; 19:18). The word “betimes” in Proverbs 13:24 means early. See Genesis 26:31 and 2 Chronicles 36:15. The discipline must begin as soon the child can understand what the parent is communicating, and that is usually within the first few months. If discipline doesn’t begin early it can be too late and the child won’t respond properly. The child must be disciplined “*while there is hope.*” The best time to train a teenager is when he or she is a toddler.

DISCIPLINE MUST BE USED IN THE MIDST OF THE RIGHT TRAINING (Prov. 22:6).

Correction and the use of the rod is only one small part of training the child. The parents must launch into a full-scale training program to teach the children the way they should go, and in the midst of that, if a child refuses to obey, he must be corrected with the rod. But it is not just correcting a child that will cause him to go in the right way when he is old; it is training him in that way, with all that this entails, e.g., developing a close relationship with him, teaching him the Bible, building in him moral character, reaching his heart with the truth, educating him in the dangers that await him in the world, etc.

The training must take the child along in the right way. He must be trained “*in the way he should go.*” This does not refer to the child’s own natural way but to God’s way. The Hebrew word translated “train up” (*chanak*) means “to narrow.” It refers to constricting the child’s path to God’s narrow way and hemming him in with God’s Word and thus keeping him off of the broad way that leads to destruction (Mat. 7:13-14).

DISCIPLINE MUST MAKE EFFECTIVE USE OF THE ROD (Prov. 23:13-14, 24; 29:15).

The rod is mentioned four times in Proverbs in association with child discipline. This is the proper biblical instrument of discipline. A rod is not the parents hand; it's not a belt; it's not a leather whip; it's not a fist; it's not a slap; it's not a kick; it's not yelling; it's not threatening. Webster's 1828 dictionary defined a rod as "the shoot or long twig of any woody plant; a branch, or the stem of a shrub; as a rod of hazle, of birch, of oak or hickory." See Genesis 30:37 and Jeremiah 1:11. Previous generations called the spanking rod a "tree switch." My maternal grandmother used switches from the trees that grew around her house in central Florida, and they were so effective that all of her many children professed faith in Christ as adults and had successful marriages and no divorces.

The rod must not be spared (*"He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes,"* Prov. 13:24). This means to draw back from using it.

The rod can be spared *by withholding it altogether*. Many parents spare the rod by replacing spanking with psychological tricks of manipulation. The Bible states that these parents do not really love their children.

The rod can be spared *by withholding it from time to time* when it should be used. Some parents start out using the rod properly, but they then slack off. Others use the rod from time to time, but they do not use it consistently every time that it is required. Do not be deceived. God's Word says, *"He that spareth his rod hateth his son..."* There are many things that will tempt a parent to spare the rod, such as a child's cries (Prov. 19:18), physical weariness, impatience with the slow process of discipline, interference by well-meaning but misguided friends and relatives, and mental frustration, but if the rod is spared when it should be used the child will not be properly disciplined.

The rod can be spared by withholding it from *some* of the children. It is not uncommon for parents to be more strict with a firstborn child than with those that are born later. It is especially common for parents who have a child out of season to spare the rod.

The rod must be used when the child is rebellious (Prov. 22:15; 23:13). A biblical rod is a rod of correction. The rod is not to be used merely when the parent is frustrated with the child; it is used to correct a child that refuses to listen to verbal commands and instruction. It is used to reinforce the necessity of true and instant obedience. It is used to correct disobedience and rebellion.

The rod must be used with sufficient force to correct the child (Prov. 23:13). The rod is for the purpose of giving a beating. It should hurt, and it should hurt enough to get the point across and to bring real heart-level submission. If the rod is used but the child still persists in disobedience it has not been used with sufficient vigor or persistence. Parents often fail at this point. They use the rod a little but not enough to bring the desired results, and they then think that it doesn't

work. The problem is not with the rod; the problem is with its half-hearted, inconsistent misuse. I recall some Christian friends who had a two-year-old boy who was extra large and extra rebellious. The mother would “spank” him by giving him a couple of swats on his thick diaper with her hand and he would literally laugh it off and persist with his mischief and rebellion. Not surprisingly, by the time the child approached his teenage years he was uncontrollable. The biblical use of the rod would have stopped that fearful rebellion in its tracks and would have saved that family a lot of heartache and that child a lot of sorrow. The foolishness that is bound in a child’s heart must be “driven” away, and this takes proper force and firm resolve and steadfast perseverance (Prov. 22:15).

The rod must be used rather than multiple commands and threats. Many parents fall into the trap of telling their child “no” repeatedly and warning and threatening instead of calmly and swiftly and consistently using the rod to train the child to obey at their first command. If he doesn’t obey after ONE command, he should be spanked with the rod until he does obey. If he is given multiple commands before he is spanked with the rod he is actually being taught NOT to obey and he is training his parents more than they are training him. He learns that his parents don’t really mean it when they give him a command or even when they warn him, because they let him get away with multiple acts of disobedience.

DISCIPLINE MUST BE DONE FOR THE RIGHT REASON AND WITH THE RIGHT SPIRIT (Prov. 3:11-12; 13:24; 22:6).

If the parent doesn’t have the right motive and spirit when using the rod it won’t work and it might produce the exact opposite of godly submission. The right motive is the desire to train the child so that he will go in the right path, and the right spirit is love. If the motive or spirit is anger or vengeance or hatred or jealousy or frustration or the desire to cause harm or any such fleshly thing the rod can cause more harm than good. I wish I had understood these things better when I was a young parent and my children were little, but I do understand them now by God’s grace and I urge young parents to exercise child discipline in the right spirit. John G. Paton, the famous missionary to the New Hebrides islands who suffered much for Christ and won many headhunters to the Saviour, in his biography described the training and discipline he received as a child. He grew up in a happy but very religious and sober home and the discipline was effective in the lives of each of the eleven children. After describing the way the family spent their Sundays and how the children were carefully catechized in Bible doctrine throughout the week and how his father used the rod of correction when necessary, he observed: “Of course, if the parents are not devout, sincere, and affectionate,--if the whole affair on both sides is taskwork, or worse, hypocritical and false,--results must be very different indeed! God help the homes where these things are done by mere force and not by love!” (*John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides*, 1891).

DISCIPLINE SHOULD HAVE ETERNITY IN MIND (“*and when he is old, he will not depart from it,*” Prov. 22:6; “*and shalt deliver his soul from hell,*” Prov. 23:14).

Parents must not be shortsighted. By keeping the future in mind the parent can look beyond the child's tears and beyond his own weariness and impatience to the day when the child will be grown and even beyond that to the day the child leaves this present life and journeys either to heaven or hell.

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